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SUBJECT: MINORITY POLICY: XINJIANG RIOTS SPARK DEBATE OVER

REFORMING THE SYSTEM

REF: A. BEIJING 3127

[1](#)B. BEIJING 2946

[1](#)C. BEIJING 2183 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)D. BEIJING 303

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor
Aubrey Carlson. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The July 5 riots in Xinjiang have sparked a heated debate over the merits of China's Soviet-style minority policy and system of autonomous regions. Beijing University sociologist and Communist Party ethnic policy advisor Ma Rong, according to several contacts, is leading the charge to scrap China's system of autonomous regions and preferential social policies for Tibetans, Uighurs and other minorities in favor of an assimilationist policy. Though scholars are not free to criticize the Communist Party's ethnic policies directly, Chinese intellectuals have been openly debating the virtues of the United States' approach to protecting minority rights, which many perceive as more successful. While none of our contacts predicted China would soon abandon its minority policy, many believed the growing doubts about the Party's current approach could lead to significant reforms after 2012, when Hu Jintao will presumably step down from his position as General Secretary. While Ma Rong's ideas appear to be gaining traction among Han intellectuals, including pro-democracy activists, talk of major changes to the autonomy system and adoption of an American-style "melting pot" model is making minority scholars nervous. Rather than dismantling the autonomy system, one ethnic Yi professor told us, China should be strengthening it and increasing, not eliminating, affirmative action for minorities, who continue to face grinding poverty and discrimination. A Tibetan activist said that, for all its flaws, China's minority autonomy system is the only thing preventing whole-scale linguistic and cultural domination by the Han. End Summary.

Xinjiang Riots Cast Doubt on Minority Policy

[1](#)2. (C) According to numerous academic contacts, the July 5 riots in Urumqi, Xinjiang, where ethnic clashes between Uighurs and Han resulted in nearly 200 deaths (refs A,B,C), have generated an unprecedented debate among Chinese intellectuals about the merits of China's system of nominal regional autonomy for ethnic minorities. Under the system put into place by Mao Zedong, and copied largely from the Soviet Union, the Chinese government officially recognizes 56 ethnic groups or

"nationalities" (minzu). The overwhelming majority, about 92 percent of China's population, belong to the Han ethnic group. Areas with a large non-Han population were designated, depending on their size, as autonomous townships, counties, prefectures, or regions (zizhi xiang/xian/zhou/qu). China has five provincial-level autonomous regions: the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Though theoretically designed to allow China's minorities to exercise limited self-rule, in practice, political authority in China's "autonomous" regions resides in the (almost always Han) local party secretary, while an ethnic minority leader holds the symbolic position of regional "chairman," a post equivalent to a provincial governor but lacking any real power. Under the system, some ethnic groups are the beneficiaries of special social policies such as preferential university admission and exemption from the one-child policy.

13. (C) Ma Rong (protect), a Beijing University Sociologist and frequent advisor to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) United Front Work Department on ethnic policy, has emerged as a leading critic of the "Soviet system" and, according to numerous contacts, his influence has grown since the July riots in Xinjiang. Ma Rong's opposition to China's minority autonomy system predates recent unrest in Xinjiang and Tibet. In numerous meetings with PolOff starting in 2007, Ma complained that the

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Chinese government's practice of specifying a citizen's ethnicity on his/her national ID card (shenfen zheng) and shunting non-Han students into a separate system of minority universities had hampered the development of a unifying Chinese national identity that encompassed all ethnic groups. The autonomy system, he said, reinforced ethnic differences and encouraged Tibetans, Uighurs and other minorities to identify primarily with their own ethnic group rather than with China as a whole. All ethnic groups, Ma frequently argued, should be treated equally, and China had to move away from a system that gave special benefits to certain ethnic groups.

14. (C) In a meeting with PolOff November 12, Ma said his calls for scrapping the minority autonomy system remained controversial, and he was still not able to publish them freely inside China. Ma said that for ideological reasons and because of the general conservatism of the CCP, major changes to the minority autonomy system were unlikely in the next several years despite recent problems. However, he added, the Urumqi riots of July 2009 had badly rattled China's leadership and had prompted an unprecedented rethinking of ethnic policy among both officials and academics that could lead to reform after 2012 (when Hu will presumably step down as CCP General Secretary). (Note: Ma claimed the Urumqi riot was actually much worse than the government was publicly admitting and that the real death toll was closer to 1000 rather than the official figure of 197. We have no information that would confirm Ma's assertion.) A lively debate was underway about how to reform the autonomy system, Ma claimed, though discussion was still largely confined to internal Party publications and conferences closed to the general public.

What Can China Learn from the United States?

15. (SBU) With public discussion of China's autonomy system still restricted, discussion of the pros and cons of the U.S. model has become a proxy for debating China's own ethnic problems. Some of this debate played out in the latter half of 2009 in the pages of Southern Weekend (Nanfang Zhoumo), an envelope-pushing weekly newspaper widely read by Chinese intellectuals. On July 16, just 11 days after the outbreak of the Urumqi riots, Southern Weekend published an article by Ma Rong under the headline "How the United States Handles Ethnic Problems (minzu wenti)." In the article, Ma says the United States had minimized racial and ethnic conflict by encouraging all groups to assimilate into a common culture based on the English language and "Christian values." The United States "allowed" ethnic groups to maintain elements of their traditional cultures, Ma wrote, but the U.S. government also supported the blurring of racial lines by, among other methods, "encouraging inter-racial marriage." The United States, according to Ma's article, had thus been able to gradually build an American national identity that transcends race and ethnicity.

16. (SBU) Ma's op-ed prompted a lengthy rebuttal in the November 19 edition of Southern Weekend by Macao University professor Hao Zhijun. The United States avoided racial/ethnic conflict not by forced assimilation into a common English/Christian culture, Hao retorted, but by respecting and encouraging linguistic, cultural and religious diversity. America did not have serious separatist movements, Hao added, because states enjoyed high degrees of autonomy and the ability to democratically elect their governors. Contrary to Ma Rong's argument, Hao said, construction of an American national identity had not come at the expense of weakening racial/ethnic identity and there was no inherent conflict between the two. The United States, Hao concluded, continued to grapple with problems of racism but "at least they can discuss these problems, people can take to the streets to protest, and they can take legal action."

17. (C) During a December 1 meeting with PolOff, prominent human rights attorney Mo Shaoping said

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that, in his opinion, China's system of ethnic autonomous regions was one of the primary contributing factors to the violence in Tibet and Xinjiang. Echoing Ma Rong's analysis, Mo said that ethnic minorities could never perceive themselves as true Chinese citizens while they were "contained" in officially designated minority regions. Such a system inherently marginalized minorities by implying that they were not welcome elsewhere in the country and forced them to live in a parallel, and inferior, status. Mo, too, referred to the United States noting that a formulation such as the "Hispanic State of Texas" would be justifiably unthinkable and would contribute to, rather than alleviate, ethnic divisions. Mo said that, from his perspective as a lawyer, China's ethnic policy was one of the primary systemic legal impediments to improving China's human rights conditions.

Autonomy: Mend It, Don't End It

18. (C) Despite a general consensus among pro-reform Han observers on the flaws of current ethnic policy, scholars who are members of minority ethnic groups expressed concern over this debate. Pan Jiao

(protect), an ethnologist at Central Nationalities University (CNU) and a member of the Yi minority, told PolOff November 13 that he was worried about the growing calls to "study the United States." Pan said underlying the arguments of Ma and others pushing an "assimilation model" was a misunderstanding of the United States' legal system as being completely focused on individual rights and giving no recognition to ethnic groups. In fact, Pan argued, the United States did grant legal recognition to native American tribes, which were analogous to China's indigenous minorities. If China should study anything, Pan said, it would be the United States' model of granting limited sovereignty to Indian tribes. In reality, he noted, the autonomy enjoyed by native Americans far exceeded that of China's minorities. The best way for China to manage ethnic unrest, Pan said, was not to scrap regional autonomy, but rather to improve it by boosting economic investment in minority regions, fighting discrimination, and increasing, not eliminating, the special benefits, such as preferential college admission, provided to minorities.

19. (C) Guan Kai (protect), an expert on ethnic policy at CNU who formerly studied under Ma Rong, said he shared many of Pan's concerns. Guan, a member of the Manchu minority who worked as an official at the State Ethnic Affairs Commission from 1990 to 2006, told PolOff November 19 that China's weak legal system made adoption of the "U.S. model," with its reliance on individual lawsuits to protect minority rights, impossible. "Our courts cannot protect the individual rights of any citizen, much less minorities," Guan said. China's ethnic tensions were the result of complex social and cultural factors, and scholars were oversimplifying the problem by placing all blame for unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang on the "Soviet system." Rather than scrap the autonomy system, China should take a "gradualist approach" to reforming ethnic policy. Guan argued that China should attempt experiments with an improved autonomy system at the county level, one that would give real power to local, minority-led governments. Under the experiments Guan envisioned, ethnic Han officials would be withdrawn and minority leaders would be given the power to formulate budgets and decide funding priorities. Guan said counties in rural areas of the Tibet Autonomous Region, where the Han population was minimal, were the best places to start such experiments. If successful, this new model could then be extended to the prefecture or even regional level.

10. (C) Both Pan and Guan, however, admitted that their views were increasingly unpopular in the wake of the Xinjiang unrest. China's top leadership, Pan said, had been caught completely off guard by the Urumqi riots. "They could not understand how something like that could happen at a time when China is doing so well overall." The Party and

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government agencies, according to Pan, had commissioned several internal studies to investigate the root causes of the Xinjiang violence. The conclusions of many of these reports were critical of China's current nationality system. Though official elimination of the minority autonomy system was unlikely, Pan said, he was concerned that the academic debate had become so politically charged that major changes to minority policy were becoming a possibility. Reforms made in the name of promoting equality and treating all citizens as

equals, he said, risked making things worse for China's minorities.

"Democracy Only Path to Real Autonomy"

¶11. (C) Despite the misgivings of scholars like Pan and Guan, several pro-reform Han intellectuals are advocating fundamental change to China's ethnic policy, with some believing that ethnic tensions can only be resolved through democratization of China as a whole. Guo Yushan (protect), a founder of the independent think tank The Transition Institute and a signer of the Charter 08 pro-democracy manifesto (ref D), told PolOff December 9 that he wanted to see China scrap the Soviet minority model entirely. China should return to a policy used in the Ming and Qing dynasties of assimilating minority leaders by giving them power and status within a unified political structure. A federal structure where all provinces, minority or otherwise, would enjoy autonomy, including the freedom to elect all provincial leaders, could constitute a modern version of this system, Guo said. Under such a system, the popularly elected provincial governments of Tibet and Xinjiang would naturally be dominated by Tibetans and Uighurs. Guo argued that truly self-governing provinces, like states in the U.S., would be less likely to seek independence, though he acknowledged that the transitioning from the current centralized authoritarian regime to a democratic federal system would be difficult. At least initially, Guo predicted, democratization would cause an increase in separatist sentiment in minority regions, which in turn would risk sparking a nationalist backlash that would endanger further democratic reforms.

"Ending Autonomy Would Be a Disaster"

¶12. (C) Tibetan poet and blogger Woesser (Wei Se) told PolOff October 16 she was alarmed at how the idea of eliminating the Soviet ethnic model was gaining traction not only among mainstream scholars, but also among her fellow pro-democracy dissidents (Woesser also signed Charter 08). Woesser expressed skepticism that the United States represented a good example for China. Spain's Basque and Catalonia regions, or the linguistic independence of Quebec, offered more appealing models for Tibetans, she said. Most of China's minorities were small in numbers and had already been culturally absorbed by the Han. Uighurs, Tibetans and Mongolians, however, were able to resist Han influence because they had their own homelands, cultures, languages and history. For all its problems and the abuses of CCP leaders, Woesser noted, the regional autonomy system legitimized the idea of preserving this separate identity. Woesser said she worried that elimination of regional autonomy would remove the final barriers to complete Han linguistic and cultural dominance over all minorities. "Scrapping the autonomy system would be a disaster for Tibetans," she said.

HUNTSMAN